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ABSTRACT

Film is not often taught for itself and by itself; it is too often viewed as the handmaiden of literature. More often than not it is taught in English departments because: (1) like novels, poems, plays and philosophical arguments, it is a humanistic text; (2) film writers and directors have historically turned to literary texts as their source material; and (3) literature and movies intersect as narrative, and thus their critics are likely to share analytical methods and goals. Unfortunately, English departments have consistently, almost universally used film as a means to another end--to inspire students, to help clarify a literary work, to study adaptation or screen writing. However, instructors and scholars owe this "singular art form of the 20th century" (James Monaco's label) better treatment. Moving visual images--whether encountered in film or via more recently developed vehicles such as video tapes, videodiscs, or interactive CD--pervade modern lives. The film medium is something that scholars and instructors too easily look right through, concentrating only on its subject matter, its story. Scholars and instructors need to examine the medium itself, to learn about its technology, its images; its sound techniques, the effects of lightning and color. They need to learn its history, its major genres, its aesthetic theories. It is good for them and their students to use cameras. (TB)

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'Making the Devil Useful': Film Studies in the English Curriculum

Moving pictures appeared on European and American cultural horizons at the turn of the century. Within ten years, wary social critics and educators pounced on the new medium as a purveyor of immorality and degradation. They were suspicious not only of the subjects presented by the infant medium, but also of actors and actresses, whose reputations for shadiness carried over from theater, and of the many foreign-born directors, producers, and studio executives.

Not unexpectedly, parents and concerned citizens voiced most apprehension for the welfare of children. In 1909, for example, the government's Child Conference for Research and Welfare examined the topic: "How much children attend the [moving pictures], the quality of the entertainment they choose, and its effect upon them." The 1912 NEA Proceedings include an article entitled, "Effect on Education and Morals of the Moving Picture Shows." Social workers asserted a direct relation between the movies and child crime. And censorship was rife nationwide.

Society's attitude toward the moving pictures was certainly reflected in education. The educator's perspective is illuminated wonderfully by Robert W. Neal in his 1913 article in The English Journal which delineates a strategy for dealing with

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what he terms "the moving-picture devil." Though Neal advocates "making the devil useful" by using it to teach composition, his admission that the instructional vehicle is generally suspect is certainly revealing (658).

In fact, film crept into schools slowly, and when it did in the teens and twenties, it entered not as a subject of study for its own sake, but in a role it would continue to play--as an audio-visual aid. It was perceived as an instructional medium and was used to convey information about various other subjects--history, government, and health, for example. By and large, fictional movies remained off-limits to all but the most innovative instructors.

By the end of the twenties, however, a subtle shift in attitudes occurred. Realizing, one suspects, that film was a permanent cultural fixture, the conservative Payne Fund studies asserted that it was the responsibility of educational institutions to teach about the harmful effects of commercial film. From the thirties through the 1950s, English Departments were tacitly assigned that responsibility to teach about film's values, because English departments were seen as best at developing human ideals and positive beliefs. Literature had been successfully employed to that end--many educators still see values instruction as its principal purpose--and films could serve the same master even more efficiently. Initially English teachers focused more on the harmful values inherent in the still-suspect medium, but eventually that focus broadened to

include humanistic values implicit in films.

The 1960s mark a watershed in the academic history of film, adding a new dimension to the profile of film study. By the sixties, film itself had gained respect as a legitimate expressive medium worthy of examination in its own right. This was especially true at the college level, where it emerged as a distinct academic discipline for the first time--perhaps not a respected discipline, but a discipline nonetheless! In the seventies and early eighties, film studies boomed, with the number of film courses on campuses increasing rapidly. The students of these years were the first generation "that [had] matured in a culture in which the film [had] been of accepted serious relevance . . . " (Kauffmann 415).

The rapid proliferation of film studies courses in higher education during these decades is evident in some astonishing statistics. Between 1967 and 1978, the number of colleges and universities offering film study grew from 200 to 1067. By the latter date, these institutions offered almost 10,000 courses, including over a thousand on the graduate level. Over 300 schools offered programs leading to a degree in film or television. (Bohnenkamp 11-12)

These numbers are certainly impressive, but the last figure cited is perhaps most telling--only 307 schools, of the 1000+ which offered courses, offered degrees in film or television. That fact stems in large part from the fact that even today the vast majority of film courses are still housed in departments not

devoted exclusively to media studies. As Barry Keith Grant notes, "because film incorporates aspects of so many other fields of study (history, psychology, art, architecture, sociology, philosophy, politics, drama, photography), the question of where in the conventional structure of higher education film might or should be taught" has been problematic (ix). Film is, as he says, a "most eclectic art." A report in the late eighties reveals that film studies programs are housed in some dozen academic disciplines--communication, theater, art, education, speech, instructional media, and so forth. However, the greatest number of film classes, by far, are offered through English departments. There film has secured a place alongside other so-called peripheral elements which have migrated into university English departments since the sixties: folklore, creative writing, and linguistics.

Why the persistent linkage with English? The answers are manifold. First is the tie with the humanities. In his article "Film Study and the University of Chicago," where, by the way, film courses are housed in the English department, Gerald Mast notes that film study is based on the "assumption . . . that films, like poems, novels, plays, philosophical arguments, historical theories, paintings, statues, and musical compositions, are human artistic products and, therefore, can be studied as humanistic texts" (4).

Second, film has been coupled with literature from its infancy. Historically, directors and writers have turned to

literary texts as source material for their films. Further, as was early pointed out by Russian theorist and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, numerous film techniques are adapted from literature. More recently, authors of the literary text have drawn technique from film. Moreover, the two intersect as narrative, and thus their critics are likely to share analytical methods and goals. Dating all the way back to Robert Neal, the teacher cited earlier, educators have used film to teach plot, character, and dialogue. Most fundamentally, I suppose, English teachers have long been attracted to film because it inspires student interest in literature, helps students visualize what they read, and serves as a topic for essays and research papers. It is therefore not too surprising that film study has begun and remained within the purview of departments of English.

If you step back and examine what we have done with film in our English department offerings, however, one point seems clear. That is that we have consistently and almost universally used film as a means to another end--to inspire students, to help clarify a literary work, to study adaptation or screenwriting. We talk about it as a visualized piece of writing. Film is not often taught as itself, but is too often viewed as the handmaiden of literature.

I believe that we owe this "singular art form of the twentieth century" (James Monaco's label) better treatment. Moving visual images-- whether we encounter them as film in its traditional form in theaters, or via more recently developed vehicles such as

video tapes, videodiscs, or interactive CD--pervade our lives. They surround us, available everywhere from our living rooms to our airplanes. The film medium is something that we and our students too easily look right through, concentrating only on its subject matter, its story. We need to examine the medium itself, to learn about its technology, its images, its sound techniques, the effects of lighting, and color. We need to learn its history, its major genres, its aesthetic theories. It is good for us and our students to use cameras--easy now that camcorders are so accessible. In short, we need just as much to become cinematically literate, as we urge our students to become literarily literate. Then we will do a more competent job of teaching film in our English departments.

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